

Lilac Route for loop could run into a legal roadblock DOT might need legislative permission even to consider it

May 23, 2012

By: Bruce Siceloff

A newly proposed alternative path for the 540 Outer Loop through southern Wake County, known as the Lilac Route, appears less controversial than older options marked on multicolored planning maps - but the Department of Transportation might not even be allowed to study the new route without getting permission first from the General Assembly.

The Regional Transportation Alliance, a business advocacy group, released maps Tuesday showing how the Lilac Route could give DOT the option it needs to satisfy demands by federal environmental regulators.

DOT wants to build this section of 540 as an extension of the Triangle Expressway, a six-lane toll road. In January, DOT said the only viable path was the so-called Orange Route, which was proposed by road planners in the 1990s. But the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other regulators said they would be unlikely to approve the Orange Route - which would damage sensitive wetlands - unless DOT provided another alternative for comparison.

DOT's hands are tied by legislation enacted last year at the request of Garner residents. To kill the reviled Red Route option, which would have bulldozed neighborhoods and parks in Garner, the legislature prohibited DOT from even studying the possible construction of 540 on any path that is north of the Orange Route.

The newly released map shows that most of the Lilac Route lies north of the Orange Route.

Garner Mayor Ronnie Williams said last year's legislation might prevent DOT from studying the Lilac Route and a second new option called the Plum Route. Town residents would be uneasy about tinkering with a law that has shielded them from the Red Route, he said, but acknowledged that might be necessary.

"It has been discussed," Williams said. "Amending or tweaking the legislation, that's been part of the discussion. But if we're going to tweak the legislation, we want to be assured upfront that the two new routes are acceptable."

Williams said he wouldn't want to see any legislative changes proposed before next year. Joe Milazzo, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, said it might not be necessary to change the law in order for DOT engineers to study the Lilac Route.

Looking at Lilac impact

In fact, DOT planners told the Corps of Engineers in an email Tuesday that they have begun assessing the Lilac Route's impact on streams, wetlands and residences. Early indicators are that it would reduce the Orange Route's wetlands impacts by at least 30 percent, Milazzo said.

The Lilac and Plum routes were recommended by Dawson and Associates, a Washington-based consulting firm hired by Garner and Milazzo's group. If DOT is not allowed to study the new routes, local officials may find it necessary to keep Dawson and Associates on the payroll a bit longer.